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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ASHGABAT 000350

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SUBJECT: CODEL HOEKSTRA'S MEETING WITH DEPUTY CHAIRMAN FOR
FOREIGN AFFAIRS MEREDOV: U.S. IS IMPORTANT TO TURKMENISTAN

Classified By: Classified by Acting Charge d'Affaires, Ambassador Richard Hoagland, for reasons 1.4(B) and (D).

Summary

1. (C) Michigan Congressman Peter Hoekstra, Ranking Member of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Minority Staff Director Michael Meermans, Permanent Staff Member Jim Lewis and Acting Charge d'Affaires met for about 75 minutes on April 4 with Deputy Chairman and Minister of Foreign Affairs Rashit Meredov. Meredov spoke at length about his country's relationship with Iran, using his country's "positive neutrality" to justify the two's "friendly" economic relations. While hoping that "reason would prevail" in current international disputes with Tehran, he equally stressed that Turkmenistan will always hew to UN resolutions. On energy policy, Meredov stressed that his country wanted to use its hydrocarbon revenue to improve its people's well-being, and recognized the benefits of diversifying its pipelines. In the end, Turkmenistan would look to its own interests, since "the market is the market" and the people's well-being was at stake. End Summary.

Meredov Eager to Expand Relations with U.S. Congress

2. (C) Congressman Hoekstra met with Meredov seven hours before Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov's plane was due to land in Ashgabat. Although the Foreign Ministry was obviously focused on preparations for the Lavrov visit and the Congressman's meeting started late because Meredov had been on the phone, the Deputy Chairman was focused throughout the meeting as he stressed his country's wish to improve its relationship with the U.S. Congress, as well as the U.S. Executive branch.

"Positive Neutrality" Benefits Region...

13. (C) Responding to a question from the Congressman on Turkmenistan's views on the situation in Iran, Meredov explained Turkmenistan's policy of "positive neutrality," which was directed toward promoting peace. There were many instances when Turkmenistan's neutrality had benefited the region, including:

-- Turkmenistan's role in resolving the civil war in Tajikistan, when it hosted UN-sponsored negotiations that led to the creation of a Government of National Unity, and Ashgabat's willingness to accept up to 20,000 Tajik refugees when no other country in the region would take them;

-- Its role in supporting UN-sponsored negotiations in the late 1990's between the Northern Alliance and Taliban in Afghanistan; and

-- Turkmenistan's agreement to facilitate humanitarian operations in Afghanistan by permitting overflights.

Turkmenistan played a serious role in the region that had always focused on resolving problems through diplomatic means. Given its policy of neutrality, Turkmenistan hoped that the current situation in Iran also could be resolved peacefully, through negotiation.

...But Turkmenistan Will Always Adhere to UN Resolutions

14. (C) However, Meredov stressed, Turkmenistan had always supported international efforts carried out within the framework of the UN and the UN Security Council. As a

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country with a permanent policy of positive neutrality -- a policy that had been confirmed by a UN resolution -- Turkmenistan would always honor UN and UN Security Council resolutions, just as it would continue to maintain friendly relations with its neighbors.

Turkmenistan Hopes Reason Will Prevail in Iran

15. (C) When Congressman Hoekstra solicited Meredov's thoughts on how Iran might respond to UN Security Council resolution 1747, Meredov replied that, officially, Iran has its own version of its issues with the UN Security Council. However, Turkmenistan hoped that all countries, including Iran, would implement all UN documents and resolutions and that common sense would prevail in any situation. Congressman Hoekstra responded that he respected Turkmenistan's position of positive neutrality, and also hoped that the UN actions would result in more rational thinking. However, the United States remained concerned by the possibility that Iran would not react rationally; Iran's leaders had publicly committed to follow their nuclear program and could not easily back down. Was it possible for common sense to prevail in such a situation? he asked.

16. (C) Speaking carefully, Meredov noted that Iran and Turkmenistan were neighbors and that there were ancient ties between the peoples of the two countries, as well as many ethnic Turkmen living in Iran. The current relationship between the two governments was cooperative; ties between the two countries were primarily economic in nature. While it was difficult to predict how Iran would respond to the UN Security Council resolution -- this was, in fact, an internal issue -- Meredov urged that resolution of any issue should be pursued through international legal mechanisms and procedures. Iranian officials were smart and educated, with a long diplomatic history. In looking at the situation, it was necessary to keep in mind Iran's rich history and past diplomatic experience. Such an approach would help ensure a peaceful resolution. Agreeing that the situation was very complicated, Congressman Hoekstra stressed that cooperation from countries in the region was essential if the Iranian

issue were to be resolved peacefully.

Meredov: Neutrality a Policy of Engagement

17. (C) Congressman Hoekstra hoped that, in the future, more members of Congress would have the opportunity to meet with Turkmenistan's officials. Meredov agreed, noting that the last congressional delegation had visited in winter 2002, five years ago. Hoping it would not be another five years until the next Congressional visit, the Congressman said he was glad that Turkmenistan's policy of neutrality allowed for engagement and dialogue, which led to greater openness. "Absolutely," Meredov responded, "in our meetings with our U.S. counterparts, we always seek to convey that neutrality means openness, availability and a willingness to engage in dialogue."

Turkmenistan Sees Value of Diversified Pipelines

18. (C) Responding to a question from Congressman Hoekstra on the prospects for Central Asian cooperation on energy, Meredov stated that Turkmenistan strove for openness and cooperation on energy issues, and was ready to cooperate with other countries on a basis of mutual benefit and interest. The main route for Turkmenistan's exports was to the north, through Russia, then to other countries. Following late President Niyazov's visit to China last year, Turkmenistan had signed a thirty-year agreement to begin exporting 30

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billion cubic meters (bcms) of gas to China per year, beginning in 2009. These exports would go east. In addition, there had been serious work done on a Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline (TAPI) project by international financial institutions, including by the Asian Development Bank, which had financed a feasibility study. A group was continuing to work on the project, which had serious economic, political and social implications. For example, as the country supplying the gas, Turkmenistan would profit. Afghanistan, a transit country for the gas, would receive at least \$300 million at today's gas prices; the TAPI, which would include gas compressor stations, would also create 12,000 new jobs; all this would benefit Afghanistan. Pakistan, a consumer, would also profit, as would India's rapidly expanding economy. Toward the west, the idea of a Trans-Caspian pipeline (TCP) was being resurrected; the TCP offered a possible new -- and profitable -- direction for exporting gas. Meredov stressed that Turkmenistan's energy policy would continue to be based on the principle that Turkmenistan would sell its gas at the border going in any direction; after that, it was up to the transit and consuming countries to decide how to transport the gas.

19. (C) Noting that Congressman Hoekstra had been to Azerbaijan, Meredov asked whether the Congressman believed that the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) and Nabucco pipelines would reach full capacity without Turkmenistan gas. The Congressman responded that, while he was not an expert, he thought it was unlikely; people in the region believed that Turkmenistan's participation was critical. Meredov interjected that the problem was likely that the BTC and Nabucco pipelines had been built to carry a total of 24 bcms of gas -- too high a volume. The A/CDA noted that one of the great benefits of exporting products in all directions was that such a policy increased a country's wealth; the increased wealth, in turn, improved the people's situation; countries that used their resources wisely to build wealth increased their sovereignty.

Hydrocarbon Revenue a Means of Increasing Well-Being

10. (C) Meredov nodding, said, "that's precisely what we are talking about." President Berdimuhamedov wanted to increase

the well-being of Turkmenistan's citizens, and saw the country's natural resources as the basis of that goal. Turkmenistan already was demonstrating the benefits of pipeline diversity (sic). But the market was the market, and profit was important. Turkmenistan needed to consider its own interests, since the issue boiled down to the people's well-being.

Broader Cooperation Benefits Bilateral Relations

¶11. (C) Thanking the Congressman for the good cooperation and assistance Turkmenistan was already receiving from the United States, Meredov quickly reviewed the range of bilateral projects, including in counternarcotics, border security, economic, cultural and educational areas. He noted in particular an exhibition featuring Turkmen carpets that had opened three days earlier at the Textile Museum in Washington DC, as well as U.S. participation in the Ministry of Culture-sponsored International Festival of Theater Arts and Folklore in Ashgabat. Such cooperation, he concluded, was important because it helped the people of both countries to know each other better.

Comment

¶12. (C) Meredov is keenly aware that, as Turkmenistan's new

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leadership is defining its new foreign policy, it is walking a fine line in its efforts to balance frequently competing demands from Washington, Moscow, Tehran, and elsewhere; "positive neutrality" provides, at best, a fig leaf. In the case of Iran, while Meredov undoubtedly feels that Turkmenistan must continue to be "friendly" with its much larger and more powerful neighbor, it is notable that he continues to stress his country's intent to adhere to UN resolutions; nonetheless, he clearly feels the pressure from both sides. This tension is even more evident in Turkmenistan's relations with Russia: with most international diplomats here agreeing that Lavrov will push during his visit to keep Turkmenistan in the fold through membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Eurasian Economic Alliance and continued heavy reliance on the Russian pipelines, the question remains how effectively Meredov will be able to deploy "positive neutrality" to maintain at least a semblance of sovereignty. Given the heavy scrutiny Ashgabat is now receiving, it is hardly surprising that President Berdimuhamedov chose to make his first state visit to Riyadh, rather than to Moscow or any of the other capitals in the region. End Comment.

¶13. (U) CODEL Hoekstra did not clear this cable but authorized sending it.
HOAGLAND